

CHAPTER ONE

OUT-OF-THE-BOX
LEADERSHIP



PAUL D. HOUSTON

We hear the phrase “getting out of the box” a lot, but what does it mean and why should we bother? After all, boxes are very useful. They keep our lives from getting all cluttered by giving us a place to put things. If you are a dog, they are a great spot for a nap. If you are a cat, well, you know the rest.

The problem arises if you are a leader. Leaders can’t let themselves get boxed into old ways of thinking and being. Simply having a place to put old ways of doing, and finding comfort in that, is not enough. New challenges require new solutions, and even old challenges can only be overcome by taking a fresh look at them. It might be argued that finding ways to crawl out of the box has become a basic skill for leaders.

My friend Dawna Markova once said that we become the stories we tell ourselves. If one tells what she calls “rut stories,” one becomes trapped in old ways of thinking and doing. Rut stories travel down well-worn neural pathways; they remind us of what we can’t do and can’t become. Dawna suggests that we consider another set of

2 Out-of-the-Box Leadership

stories—what she calls “river stories.” River stories take us to new places, but they can be scary because they take us to the unknown.

For many years, I have had a thing about bridges. I don’t like driving over them. My palms get sweaty, and I clench the steering wheel tighter than a child holding a Popsicle. I once described this to a friend, who suggested that I had a “phobia” about bridges. I did not, I protested, because phobias are irrational fears, and there is nothing irrational about being afraid of bridges. Bridges take us from what we know to what we don’t know—from a place that is familiar and safe to someplace that may be less safe.

And yet that is exactly the role of education and leadership. The role of an educational leader is to build a bridge and lead people across it, because it is only by crossing that bridge that people can find a new place to stand. Leading people to discover their river stories, and helping them build their bridges, is at the heart of leadership. But that can only happen when the leader is prepared to climb out of the familiar box that has held him or her and be willing to confront the possibility of the unknown.

❧

The role of an educational leader is to build a bridge and lead people across it, because it is only by crossing that bridge that people can find a new place to stand.

The problem is that there aren’t places to learn how to get out of the box. It requires that one push one’s own limits and perspectives. It involves changing the lens and the angle of vision. Cognitive scientists describe this as “lateral thinking.”

Lateral thinking involves consciously changing your mental seat to get a different view of the action. Lateral thinking is searching for related things in apparently unrelated activities. It is forging new paths to old places and taking old modes of transportation to new destinations.

I used to enjoy the comedian Jonathan Winters. His act involved using a simple item as a prop and then making up different stories, with the same item becoming a different thing with each story. Lateral thinking. Today’s world requires us all to become Jonathan Winters, making the familiar new and the known fresh. That is out-of-the-box leadership.

Today we find education stuck in place. Oh, certainly some progress has been made. Schools today are superior to any in our history. Yet there has never been more dissatisfaction with schools. Quite simply, the problem is this: *Schools have been making incremental progress in an exponential environment.* We have gradually

been improving education while the deteriorating social conditions surrounding families and children have confronted us with all sorts of new challenges, and the escalating demands of society and the workplace have forced upon education a much higher expectation.

Therefore, if we continue to improve the way we have, in a few years we'll be even better than we are today—and further behind. This calls for transformative leadership, and that can only come by thinking differently about our problems. As an exercise in out-of-the-box thinking, let me raise one example that might illustrate how we must begin to think. It involves the concern over our international competitive position and what we should be doing about it educationally.

During the last few years, we have developed a growing concern about our global competitiveness, particularly in relation to the rising powers of India and China. This is similar to concerns in the 1980s about Japan and Germany, but this time the competition looms larger and the stakes are higher. This topic has been in the news, bandied about by CEOs and governors; it was a centerpiece of President Bush's 2006 State of the Union address. The hysteria could best be described as "the Asians are coming, the Asians are coming." And there is no doubt that the ascendance of China as an economic power and India as a place where many U.S. jobs go to die are legitimately raising concerns. Thomas Friedman, author of the best-selling book, *The World Is Flat*,¹ makes the case persuasively. Friedman suggests that, with the ascendance of China and India, the United States will have to run faster just to stay in place.

Today, hardly a CEO can be found who does not look with awe and concern at what is happening on the other side of the world. Many U.S. businesses have shipped jobs to both India and China. As with every previous threat to U.S. dominance, U.S. schools have been called to account for not producing enough engineers and math and science workers to compete with this rising threat. The educational solutions offered are that we should make our students work harder and study more math and science. Moreover, it is thought that we need more and harder tests to motivate them to do this.

The problem with the current thinking is that the problem just isn't that simple. First, the math doesn't add up for the United States.

*Quite simply, the problem is this:
Schools have been making
incremental progress in an
exponential environment.*

4 Out-of-the-Box Leadership

Both India and China are massive countries. They need only to educate their elites and they would still have a gigantic edge in available knowledge workers. In the United States, we could make all our children high-tech workers and we would still be outnumbered. Furthermore, an engineer in either India or China will work for a fraction of the wages of his or her U.S. counterpart. To remain competitive, our workers would have to take monumental pay cuts and reductions in lifestyle simply to hold their own with Beijing and Bangalore. Left at this point, despair seems the only rational response.

The good news is that there is more to the story. Put most simply, the United States should compete at what it has always done best: being the innovative engine that drives the rest of the world economy. To do that, of course, will require increased efforts at producing more highly talented engineers and technical workers. To accomplish this, we must improve the way we teach math and science by making these subjects more engaging to students.

❧

The United States should compete at what it has always done best: being the innovative engine that drives the rest of the world economy.

But there is a larger issue emerging. Daniel Pink, in his provocative book *A Whole New Mind*,² has gone so far as to declare that the Information Age is nearing an end and that we are entering the Conceptual Age. He argues that the dominance of our left-brain-

driven world, where everything is sequential and logical, is giving way to a more right-brained society that focuses on creative, holistic skills.

Pink suggests that if you have a job that can be done by a machine, done more cheaply, or done somewhere else, you have cause to worry. Those who do conceptual and creative work—design, storytelling, and the like—will dominate in this new age. Pink turns the current discussion upside down. It isn't about how many engineers a nation has; it's about the artists and poets who can create the new meaning necessary in a conceptual world.

Richard Florida, in his *Rise of the Creative Class*,³ makes essentially the same argument. The future belongs to the creative. They will be the leaders, the learners, and the earners of the new age. It is not the programmers in India who will dominate; it is the people who conceive of the work the programmers should do who will "rule." Already we know that most of the places where the United States has an economic edge are those where our creative workers have gone before.

For example, our popular culture, best exemplified by the entertainment industry, is a major export for us; in fact, one might argue that “the American century,” as some called the last century, came about not simply because of our economic or military might, but because we were the source of the images and sounds savored by people around the globe. Even our high-tech industries have found their dominance at the edge of this work—creating new concepts of the way work should be done, or “imagineering” (as Disney calls it) new ways of doing things. Although it is important that our children be educated to be conversant and comfortable with math and science, and though we certainly need to continue to produce our fair share of technical workers, the future will not be created by these folks—it will be created by those who can dream bigger and more innovative dreams.

The implications for education are profound. We must reexamine how we are teaching children and what we are teaching them. I was one of those students who grew up hating math and science. I wasn't

—  —

We must reexamine how we are teaching children and what we are teaching them.

much happier with social studies and language arts. As an adult educator, I finally came to understand why. When I became superintendent of schools in Princeton, New Jersey, I was thrown into an environment rife with Nobel laureates and world-class theoretical mathematicians and physicists. Talking with them, I made a profound discovery. I found that the math I learned in school had the same relationship to mathematics as a log has to a blueberry.

Mathematics isn't about mastering rules; it is about discovering the *elegance* of a well-stated problem. And science is not about mastering element tables and formulas; it is about seeking out the *mysteries* of the universe. Likewise, social studies isn't about dates and events; it is about *understanding the human condition*. And literature is a way of coming to *understand* more about *ourselves*.

If we expect our children to become more adept at all these subjects, we must begin to educate our teachers to be more creative in the way the material is presented, as well as more knowledgeable about their subject matter. Teachers must be *designers* and *storytellers*. They have to get out of the box! Moreover, school leaders must reassess their roles as instructional leaders. How do we reinvent the learning process so it is meaningful and engaging for students, so they are motivated by more than a test or benchmark?

6 Out-of-the-Box Leadership

As one student said, quoted in a recent cover story in *Time* magazine on the current science crisis, “I associated engineering with long, boring assignments. No one showed me why it was cool.”⁴



How do we reinvent the learning process so it is meaningful and engaging for students, so they are motivated by more than a test or benchmark?

We must find a way to make learning relevant and “cool.” We can only do that by having teachers who are supported in their creativity. The question becomes, How can we recruit and support teachers who see themselves as artists?

Sadly, the way we are currently approaching schooling in the United States, we are destined to become a third-rate economy and a Third World power. That is because we are forfeiting our greatest edge by walking away from what we do best. In a recent commentary in *Newsweek* magazine, Fareed Zakaria, editor of *Newsweek International*, described his conversations with various people in Asia about education.⁵ China has increased their spending on colleges and universities tenfold in the past decade. This comes at a time when U.S. states, which cut taxes during the boom years of the 1990s, are now struggling to hold their own in education spending, and when the recently proposed federal budget reduces support for education by more than \$12 billion. Clearly it will be hard to maintain our edge without investment. Again, the recent story in *Time* magazine pointed out that the United States has slowed its investment in research and development at the very time that other countries have accelerated theirs. The United States currently ranks seventh in percentage of GDP spent on research.

But money is not the only issue. Zakaria talked with the minister of education in Singapore, a city-state whose education system is often compared to that of the United States. Singapore is the top-ranked performer on science and math global rankings for schoolchildren. Zakaria asked the minister to explain why it is that even though the Singaporean students do so well on these tests, when you look at the same students 10 to 20 years later, few are world-beaters. U.S. students, by contrast, test much worse but seem to do better in life and in the real world—particularly as inventors and entrepreneurs.

The minister explained that both countries have meritocracies—America’s, based on talent; Singapore’s, on test scores. Since there is much to the intellect that we cannot test effectively—such as creativity, curiosity, ambition, or a sense of adventure—the tests don’t

account for America's edge. The minister went on to explain that America's culture of learning challenges conventional wisdom, even to the point of challenging authority. He also suggested that these are the areas in which Singapore must learn from America. He finished by explaining that the problem in America is that poor children are not brought along and the very bright are allowed to coast.

The United States is currently caught up in a frenzy of test-based reform, ostensibly aimed at those who most need not to be "left behind"—those who are not "brought along." The problem is that this authoritarian model, which emphasizes the achievement of the left brain, is doomed to failure—along with many of these same children. But it will *not* be the failure of students not testing well. There is every indication that when emphasis is placed upon tests, the scores increase. Just ask Singapore. But here's the big question: Will this increase lead to increased life success for these students?

That brings us back to the premise of Daniel Pink's work: that the future belongs to the creative. The "test and tremble" model of school reform that is the current craze, which values high scores over broader success, is unlikely to move us toward a more conceptual and creative society. In fact, with the emphasis placed so solidly on basic reading and math, the "right-brained" activities that Pink espouses (art, music, and creative expression) are being squeezed out of the curriculum.

Ellen Langer, in her book *Mindfulness*,⁶ suggests that an education based on an outcomes model in fact leads to "mindlessness." She points out that from kindergarten on, the focus of schooling is usually on goals rather than on a process to achieve them. She points out that, "when children start a new activity with an outcome orientation, questions of 'can I' or 'what if I can't' are likely to predominate, creating an anxious preoccupation with success or failure rather than on drawing on the child's natural, exuberant desire to explore." Brain researchers tell us that fear inhibits cognitive ability by shutting down the synapses. A model of education based on coercive strategies is doomed to undo the very thing it is trying to accomplish: a smarter and more capable America.

❧

The authoritarian model, which emphasizes the achievement of the left brain, is doomed to failure—along with many of these same children. But it will not be the failure of students not testing well.

8 Out-of-the-Box Leadership

The major goal of U.S. education under No Child Left Behind is to “close the achievement gap,” a gap that is based on the same issues raised by the minister of education from Singapore—the fact that America has a large underclass that has not been educated to the highest possible levels. This problem is pretty universally accepted, both within our borders and beyond them. The question is whether an educational model that focuses on outcomes and deficits will close the gap or whether a different approach is called for—one that focuses on a broader definition of education and that focuses on assets.

The question is whether an educational model that focuses on outcomes and deficits will close the gap or whether a different approach is called for—one that focuses on a broader definition of education and that focuses on assets.

When it comes to poor and minority children, the irony of our current educational angst is that many of the same children who cannot read well can create and remember incredibly complex song lyrics set to hip hop music. In fact, much of America’s creativity in music came from blues, jazz, rock and roll, and rap—all products of the so-called underclass. Moreover, children who cannot spell “systems

thinking” may demonstrate an understanding of the movement of 10 people on the basketball court who are moving through time and space at high speeds, and may be able to anticipate future moves and create elegant responses to them on the run. This is the epitome of systems thinking. Children with limited English proficiency, who have trouble following a teacher’s instructions, can shift language and culture numerous times a day. Native American children who have trouble with basic math can create intricate designs and artistic creations.

The good news is that much of America’s creative expression has come from the very people we worry about not having a great left-brain education. This comes at a time when right-brain education and right-brain skills would appear to be in great demand. The assets that are already there simply need to be nourished and nurtured.

Is there not a way for America to rediscover its competitive edge—not by becoming more like the Asians, but by being more like Americans? Is there not a way to use the inherent talents that many of our underperforming children have in nonschool activities and bring those into the classroom, by helping teachers focus on the

assets the children have and by honoring their thinking skills and way of looking at the world?

Wouldn't this provide us with the ultimate "out-of-the-box" experience?

NOTES

1. Friedman, T. L. (2006). *The world is flat: A brief history of the twenty-first century*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
2. Pink, D. (2005). *A whole new mind: Moving from the Information Age to the Conceptual Age*. New York: Riverhead Books.
3. Florida, R. (2002). *The rise of the creative class*. New York: Basic Books.
4. Lemonick, M. D. (2006, February 13). Are we losing our edge? *Time*, 167(7), 22–33.
5. Zakaria, F. (2006, January 9). We all have a lot to learn. *Newsweek*, 167(2), 37.
6. Langer, E. (1989). *Mindfulness*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press.